CHINA

September 6, 2004

Welcome back to our labors, my Brothers. To commemorate our return from the summer, I have a short poem for you, written by a German dramatist named Bertolt Brecht. His most famous work was “The Threepenny Opera”, from which you might recognize the song, “Mack The Knife”. Our poem comes from his 1935 work, “Questions From A Worker Who Reads”.

Here’s the excerpt:

   “Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

   In the books you will find the names of kings.

   Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock? …

   Where, the evening that the wall of China was finished, did the masons go?”

Now there’s a question for you! We’ve seen photographs of the Great Wall of China from space. It is the only man-made object that is visible to the naked eye from a hundred miles up. We’ve seen closer pictures of it with its yellowish stone and brick towering two stories high and topped with even taller parapets and flags. It is wide enough to allow four horsemen abreast to gallop its 2,000 mile length. What barbarian chieftain would dare cross that wall to invade the lands on the other side, or challenge the power of a people who could build such a thing?

What we rarely think about today is the construction of this 2,000 mile long wall. It had a beginning and it had an end. Who can image its beginning? Where was the first stone put down, and why at that exact spot? Who was there? Was there a ceremonial laying of the cornerstone with trowels and silken robes and flags snapping in the wind, or did some Mandarin shove a stick in the ground and say, “Start here, go that way, and I’ll let you know when you’re done.”? Who devised its design and ordered its parts? What did that Trestle Board look like?

And the work! How many thousands upon thousands labored on this wall? Did it go up from end to end, or was it built in sections and joined together? From how far away did the masons and their stone and brick have to come? How was it transported and brought up for construction? How big were the forests cut down for wood to burn, to cure the bricks? How well did the workers live? Did they tell their stories on broken pieces of brick like the Egyptian tomb workers in the Valley of the Kings? Will we find those stories someday and learn what they thought about as they lived the Wall?

Even harder to imagine is that special moment when it was finished. Where, along its 2,000 miles, was the last brick placed? Was the last brick special, like the golden spike of our transcontinental railroad, or was it just the last brick? Were there any bricks left over, any excess mortar left to harden in lumps on the ground? Who decided when to say, “We are safe, you can stop now.”? Was there a celebration? And the morning after, where did the masons go?

As the poem suggests, the great works of man are made by the labors of men, not kings. Though it may be the king who is remembered for having said, “Do it!”, every stone, every mortar joint, every timber is shaped and sweated into place by the muscle of laborers and craftsmen. We don’t know the names or the faces of the men who built this Wall, but their voices cry out in the majesty of their construction, “We did this!”. And, if you were close enough to touch it, to run your hand along its smooth precision, you might believe that every perfect brick lined with mortar was saying, “I was placed, here, by a man who knew me.”

As modern speculative Masons, our labors will never be seen from space. We don’t have kings who will take credit for our work in the histories to come. Our work does not call out, “We did this!” Our labors are of a different design, a different brick and mortar; we tear down the walls that separate mankind by building moral values. We invite the barbarian in and give him 'light' to help him cross the dark walls of ignorance and inequality. As moral builders, we touch lives with the perfect bricks and mortar of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth. And when our labors are done and we lay down our tools, when the Divine voice says, “You can stop now.”, we go, leaving our constructions behind us. Found in the lives we’ve touched in our labors, our legacies are built with moral bricks that say from many hearts, “I was placed, here, by a man who knew me.”

We know where the Masons go the morning after.

Br. Stephen C. Harrington

“Questions From A Worker Who Reads”

Bertolt Brecht

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

In the books you will find the name of kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

And Babylon, many times demolished.

Who raised it up so many times? In what houses

Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?

Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished

Did the masons go? Great Rome

Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom

Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song,

Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis

The night the ocean engulfed it

The drowning still bawled for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.

Was he alone?

Caesar beat the Gauls.

Did he not have even a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada

Went down. Was he the only one to weep?

Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War.

Who Else won it?

Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every ten years a great man.

Who paid the bill?

So many reports.

So many questions.